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Iris of Louisiana *

By Percy Viosea, Jr.



(Photo Courtesy of "Flower Grower")

IRISES BLOOMING IN A SOUTHERN GARDEN

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The "Iris Center of the Universe" is the phrase applied by Dr. John K. Small, Head Curator of the Museums and Herbarium of the New York Botanical Gardens, to the region centering around New Orleans, Louisiana, when speaking about the rich fields of Water Iris which lie in the vicinity of that city. The greatest development of this Iris Center extends about fifty miles north, east and south of New Orleans, and about one hundred miles northwest, west, and southwest. Dr. Small, to whom we are indebted for a scientific study of southern plant life, refers to his discovery of these rich Iris fields in the journal of the New York Botanical Garden, in the following words:

"This remarkable local development of Iris in the tip of the Mississippi Delta is as yet inexplicable. Aside from its magnitude, the outstanding points are the often vast colonies of species, the great range and combination of colors, and the unusual size of the plants. Flowering stalks six feet tall are not unusual. Stalks seven feet high have been found during our explorations. In such cases a six-foot man has to look up in order to see the terminal flower. In view of these facts, the Lower Mississippi Delta natural Iris field constitutes the one most spectacular botanical and horticultural discovery in North America from the standpoint of a single genus within such a limited area."

The discovery of Southeastern Louisiana's truly remarkable Iris display by Dr. Small was more or less of an accident, for it was incidental to a botanical expedition from Florida to Western Texas, made during the Spring of 1925. Several plants were sent to the New York Botanical Gardens where they flourished and flowered the following Spring. Although commonly called Water Iris, it was found that the Louisiana plants were not only hardy in New York City, but in the soils and climate of New Jersey, Maryland, and Florida. In all a total of more than 8,000 plants were sent North for study, and they thrived in ordinary garden soils, whereas in their native home, many species actually lived in standing water.

The first of the new Iris discoveries to be named by Dr. Small was described in 1927 under the name of *Iris vinicolor*, the wine-colored Iris. This flower, shown in the accompanying illustration, is a rich vinaceous or reddish-purple, with a single yellow crest or ridge down the center of the long, gracefully-spreading sepals. In 1929, Dr. Small described six additional forms as new species, *Iris violipupurea*, *I. giganticaerulea*, *I. chrysophoenicia*, *I. miraculosa*, *I. chrysaeola*, and *I. atrocyanea*. A brief description of these will give some idea of the wide variety and beauty of the new Irises.

Violipupurea is about the same size and shape as *vinicolor*, but instead of being a reddish-purple it is a beautiful shade of violet-purple.

Giganticaerulea, the giant blue Iris, is perhaps one of the tallest Iris known, with its flower stalks as tall as six or seven feet. It is generally of a violet-blue or nearly-blue color, with spreading fan-shaped streaks of white. The crest is compound with several lateral ridges which spread outward. These ridges may vary from greenish-white to deep-orange and beyond them lies a zone of white which is streaked outward into the blue. There are many color varieties in this Iris, viz., shades of dark violet, violet blue, lavender, lilac and white.

Chrysophoenicia, the gold-embroidered Iris, is usually a dark violet-blue (plum color) with a crown-shaped golden crest zone at the base of the sepals. *Chrysaeola*, a related form, is a bright-violet with a yellow crest, on each side of which is a zone of greenish yellow, streaked with brownish veins.

Miraculosa is another outstanding Iris with its tall stalks each bearing several large pale-lavender or white flowers. A single prominent bright-yellow crest stands out in contrast to the light color of the sepals. Atrocyanea is a related form with somewhat smaller flowers, but of a dark violet-blue color.

In the two years following the publication of these original seven discoveries, Dr. Small and Edward J. Alexander, also of the New York Botanical Garden, have continued their studies and late in 1931 published their "Botanical Interpretation of the Iridaceous Plants of the Gulf States." In this publication a total of 96 species are described, 85 of which are native to Southern Louisiana. Including the color phases recognized up to 1930, which list has been continually growing since, already over 200 distinguishable forms are indicated. Mr. Alexander, in his color notes and descriptions summarizes these as follows:

"six various shades of violet-blue, with about fifteen different combinations of crest and color;

four various shades of lavender-blue, with about twelve different combinations of crest and color;

eleven various shades of violet, with about forty different combinations of crest and color;

seventeen various shades of red violet, with about thirty five different combinations of crest and color;

fourteen various shades of lilac, with about twenty-five different combinations of crest and color;

nine various shades of cerise and magenta with about eighteen different combinations of crest and color;

fifteen various shades of pink and old-rose, with about twenty different combinations of crest and color;

twenty-six various shades of red, orange-red, and orange, with about thirty-five different combinations of crest and color."

Dr. Small's technical classification is based primarily on the form of the crest which may be absent, single, double, triple, lance-shaped, crown-shaped, or radiating, and secondarily upon the color and other characteristics of the flowers.

Among the outstanding color forms recently discovered are a rich imperial purple, an ivory-white, a chrome-yellow, and a golden-yellow.



*It is suggested that the large number of Iris species, which may be called native to the Delta of the Mississippi, are the result of countless ages of the floating down of plant life from the upper reaches of the Mississippi river and its tributaries. It is well known that drifting bogs and patches of soil, and vegetation generally, have been floating down this great river system for many centuries. This inference is plain, therefore, that the large number of native Iris species in Louisiana may be called a natural collection of species from the vast territory drained by the greatest system of rivers in the world. In this connection note that it is stated that some of these Iris species when taken North seem to do well in a habitat entirely different from that which they find in the Delta of the Mississippi.

MADISON COOPER

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Photo by Rev. M. L.
Rousseve, S. V. D.



Photo Courtesy George K. Small
DR. J K. SMALL
COLLECTING IRISES

GARDEN

Some wimmens scrape dey yard
wid a hoe,
Sweep up de grass an' de sand,
Tote hit off in a ole tin tub
From a yard as nekkid as yo'
hand.

Me, now, I laks me a garden,
Wid lots of bushes an' shrubs,
Beds edged round wid broke
glassware
An' lil brown vinegar jugs.

I laks my chikens to wash in de
dust
Under de pomegranate tree.
De camomile settin' in dat herb
patch
Makes mighty good camomile tea.

I proud of my big fine garden,
When dat ole sun headin' west
Shines up dat cullud glassware,
Lak a pin on de garden's breast.

(Courtesy of Home Gardening for the South)

